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ABSTRACT

The development of solutions to national and international communications problems is a matter of the highest priority because of the speed and impact of current communications changes. Canada, which has developed many sophisticated communications technologies and applications, has found that in working out a communications relationship with the United States it must develop a balance between protecting legitimate sovereign rights and ensuring the free flow of information. For example, one problem implicit in the flow of data across national boundaries is the extent to which control over data is retained by the originator or the originating countries. Centralization of data, while perhaps efficient, carries some very real costs that must be considered. Many communications concerns regarding developing nations need to be considered. Recent events have shown that an accommodation to developing nations' needs and a rapprochement between developing and developed nations are occurring. The challenge for each country is to stimulate the production and dissemination of information in a way that permits society, culture, and the economy to flourish. One of the major challenges is to ensure that communications facilities appropriately serve people's needs, and the most delicate question is how much control governments should assume over information flow. (GT)

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COMMUNICATIONS AND THE NORTH-SOUTH DIALOGUE: A VITAL LINK

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NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS
BY THE
HONOURABLE FRANCIS FOX
SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS
TO THE OPENING SESSION OF THE 1980 ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF
THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATIONS (IIC)
SEPTEMBER 8, 1980

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It is a particular pleasure for me to welcome you to Canada and to the Annual Conference of the International Institute of Communications. I welcome you not only on behalf of the Government of Canada but also on behalf of the Canadian members of the Institute, some of whom are sharing this platform with me this morning. These members, from government and the private sector, represent a cross-section of communications in Canada. They have worked closely with the Secretariat of the Institute in hosting this Annual Conference.

We in Canada are proud of our communications achievements. When among our colleagues from other countries, we never say that we have the best communications system in the world. Rather, we modestly claim that our system is, and will continue to be, "second to none". But we are not complacent. There are serious questions which must be addressed if Canada is to maintain its dynamism in this field. Above all, there must be a commitment to adapt our system to meet new challenges in a creative way. This week, as you may be aware, our Prime Minister and the premiers of our 10 provinces are engaged here in Ottawa in important constitutional talks which include communications as one of a number of priority subjects.

We in Canada find ourselves facing new challenges and emerging issues in the wake of changing conditions and technology. But we are not alone. Many of the concerns we face are shared by all countries, either developed or developing.

For this reason, this Annual Conference is particularly important. It is addressing, from a multidisciplinary perspective, the most compelling international and national issues in communications. It is providing the opportunity to explore and absorb how concerns are being dealt with around the planet. In doing so, it will continue to fulfill the objective established by Canada's former Prime Minister and President of the Institute in its formative years, the late Lester B. Pearson.

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Like many other countries, Canada is a crucible of many of the issues on the agenda of this conference. We in Canada occupy an immense land mass with both developed urban and rural regions as well as vast stretches of isolated and still developing areas. While we are a sophisticated country in terms of new communications technologies and applications, we also share with developing countries many concerns related to political, cultural and economic sovereignty. These concerns were expressed last year in the report of the Clyne Committee which studied the implications of telecommunications for Canadian sovereignty.

As a developed country, we have introduced new communications technology of our own since the beginning of the era. Marconi made his first radio transmissions on our soil. Alexander Graham Bell, who rests in Nova Scotia, invented the "Electric Speaking Telephone" in Brantford, Ontario in 1874. More recently, we have become world leaders in the emerging information and communications society. In 1972, we became the first country in the world with a national communications satellite system. In 1978, we introduced Telidon, the advanced, Canadian designed videotex system. We have also become world leaders in the application of cable TV technology.

We have embraced communications technology, probably because of our historical need for contact in a vast land. Perhaps for the same reasons, our country has also spawned some of the leading thinkers and philosophers of the information age.

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In an effort to understand the forces which bind us together, Canadians such as Marshal McLuhan and Harold Innis have developed economic, political and conceptual theories of communications which explore the concepts of time and space, of history and geography in the progress of civilization. In "The Bias of Communications", Innis warns that "mechanization...has been responsible for monopolies in the field of knowledge..." which could destroy the conditions of freedom of thought in western civilization. One of his central themes is that changes in communications technology affect the very foundations of our cultures.

As a nation which is still developing, we are concerned that our national sovereignty and identity not be eroded as a result of thoughtless application of technologies without regard for their implications for the economical social fabric of the country.

The Canada-United States communications relationship is, without exaggeration, the most complex such relationship between any two countries in the world. It is certainly a mutually enriching relationship. However, as a nation sharing a border with another whose population and economy are about ten times the size of our own, we have found that "letting problems take care of themselves" is a luxury we usually cannot afford.

We are and will remain committed to the freest possible flow of information. But it is facile to attempt to categorize sophisticated policies in black and white terms. A balance is required in terms of protecting legitimate sovereign rights on the one hand, and ensuring the free flow of information on the other. Many of the communications issues which impact upon Canada-United States relations fall somewhere in between. The criterion should be whether a developed country such as Canada, or for that matter a developing country,has

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managed in its communications policies to balance competing interests in a responsible and internationally exemplary way. And one has to assess the facts in every particular case. There are obviously different dynamics at play in an East-West situation than in the Canada-United States relationship.

Let us look briefly at a specific communications issue - the flow of data across national boundaries - this is a topic on your agenda and is receiving the attention of governments throughout the world. The problem, of course, resides not in the flows themselves but in the extent to which control over data, as well as the information which results from their processing, is retained by the originator or the originating countries. There are important legal, social and economic implications in this which must not be underestimated or treated lightly. If information is power -- and I don't believe anyone disputes the point -- then there is a growing perception that a great deal of power is flowing out, not in.

While some attention has been given to the vulnerability of individual citizens when personal data flows outside the country, attention has only lately begun to focus upon the fact that centralization of data, while perhaps efficient, also carries very real costs - costs that result from an erosion of sovereignty, loss of jurisdiction and the transfer of large amounts of processing dollars and employment from one country to another. It is essential that agreement be reached on both an international and a bilateral basis in order to provide the necessary legal safeguards to protect against imbalanced flows.

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The issues here, it seems to me, are of concern both to developed and developing countries. We've heard about the "global village". But is there not a danger here of a "global headquarters" developing if present tendencies continue?

Many of the new concerns which have been pressed by developing countries during international negotiations on development strategies and priorities have influenced the debates on communications issues. Over the last few years, developing countries have begun to call for "a new international communications and information order" as the necessary companion of "the new international economic order".

Communications hardware and software, tailored to the requirements of individual countries, are essential to the process of development in general, as well as to development in particular sectors. Although the relationship between communications and development is obvious, I have been amazed at how little hard data there is on this. You may be interested to learn that the Canadian International Development Agency and the Department of Communications have been cooperating during the past year on a policy study which, we hope, will be a valuable input in establishing the vital link between telecommunications and development.

Increasingly, developing nations are making known their concerns. Recent events have demonstrated that accommodation and rapprochement are not only possible, but are, in fact, occurring. In 1979, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) successfully completed its crucial General World Administrative Radio Conference where the legitimate interests of both

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developing and developed countries were accommodated in a positive working atmosphere. Further difficult issues, many technical but with important implications for development, will be considered at the 1982 ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in Nairobi and in a series of special Administrative Radio Conferences to be held during the 80's.

As you know, a special session of the U.N. General Assembly is now meeting in New York to approve a new international development strategy, in preparation for the Global Negotiations on the subject beginning in 1981. Of particular importance in the communications field is the 21st General Conference of UNESCO, which will take place in Belgrade later this month. UNESCO is being asked to consider the recommendations of its Director-General concerning the results of the MacBride Commission which completed its two-year study of communications problems this year. UNESCO will also consider proposals for a new International Program for the Development of Communications outlined in the Conference on Communications Development held last April in Paris.

While conferences and reports are nothing new, events have begun to move at such a rapid pace that many analyses and policies are already hopelessly out of date. The all-embracing dimensions of the new information society are only now beginning to attract attention. Whether one accepts the most dramatic or more conservative predictions, it is clear that the new information society, born out of the convergence of communications and computer technologies, will bring about changes as fundamental as those caused by the Gutenberg printing press. A recent Canadian publication Gutenberg Two described this new communication age as a revolution in both scope and social impact. At the very least, a new recognition is emerging that the implications must be addressed and new policies devised as a matter of the highest priority. If we are not going merely to follow the technology, we no longer have all the time in the world to act.

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We are indeed privileged to have with us today, as our Keynote Speaker, one of the world's most enlightened proponents of development, the Right Honourable Olof Palme of Sweden, Vice-Chairman of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, The Brandt Commission. Early this year the Commission published an eloquent and comprehensive report calling for rapid and extensive growth in international financial assistance and in technical and human cooperation, as a means of narrowing the increasing gap between rich nations and poor. Mr. Palme, I am sure, will provide us with the framework to guide our discussions this week. Reflecting this call for international action, a Canadian Parliamentary Task Force has been established to examine major North-South issues and to make recommendations on what measures Canada should take as part of a meaningful international strategy.

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau has taken a strong personal interest in the advancement of the North-South dialogue, an interest that I share. As Mr. Trudeau noted this Spring, "the problems of the least developed countries are especially compelling. There can be no real solutions until the world community finds the will and the way to replace sterile rhetorical confrontation with a united and practical response to the poverty, hunger and stunted economies which oppress so many of the world's people."

Every country must decide for itself the priority to be given to communications in its national development - a lively issue, particularly in countries where development strategies must aim first and foremost for simple survival. All of us must resist the temptation to see in communications a panacea for development. The case can easily be oversold. Nevertheless, we are all interested in permanent improvement, not just temporary repairs. In both developing and developed countries, communications are a necessary lever for progress. Communications networks are the nervous system of the twentieth century nation state. The inability to receive, store and exchange information

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is an inability to plan, coordinate and organize. This shortcoming is bound to arrest economic development and to keep poor nations poor.

Used positively and boldly, new communications technology could be the cutting edge required to sever the Gordian knot of many developmental problems. Used insensitively, however, the emerging information society could contribute to freezing North-South inequalities.

There is little doubt that the capability to move information swiftly, relatively inexpensively and in greater diversity and complexity than ever before, should be of of considerable benefit to developing countries. These countries are, however, usually hardpressed to afford costly new technology. Developments in telephone, microwave, landline and underwater facilities, to say nothing of advanced outer space communication systems, are both expensive and technically demanding. A clear responsibility, therefore, resides with industrialized countries, as each of us reappraises our efforts in international assistance, to ensure that essential communication requirements are integrated in development planning.

The hardware, however, is only one side of the problem and, in fact, takes second place to the more fundamental issues associated with content. These are the questions of message rather than messenger. Today's electronic messengers, including radio, TV, satellites, fibre optics, coaxial cable and others, are more powerful and less vulnerable, for example, than the messengers of ancient Rome who occasionally paid a stiff price for the Emperor's reaction to the delivered message.

Because of the intimate relationship between hardware and software - the medium and the message - we in Canada have recently taken the step of placing federal government responsibilities for both these areas under one roof. Now, cultural and communications concerns are addressed within a single government

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agency--the Department of Communications. As I have previously noted, this change should help to ensure that communications policy is conducted with the highest concern for the cultural content and the cultural implications of communications technology. It should also help to make the cultural milieu more sensitive and more aware of the importance and the rapidity of technological progress in the field of communications. It is the Prime Minister's view that such progress should serve more and more to strengthen our culture and identity. The challenge facing many developing countries today - and, in this respect I include Canada as a developing country - is how to stimulate the production and dissemination of information and entertainment to allow society, culture and the economy to flourish.

Even in the days when the chief vehicle for cultural invasion was the motion picture screen, the flow of traffic was overwhelmingly one way. Proliferation of satellite channels, coaxial cable systems, videocassettes and discs, as well as other broadcast technology, could easily turn that flow into a tidal wave sweeping everything before it, including traditional values and the treasures of national, regional and local expression.

But the danger is not so much in the tools as in their possible abuses. So the answer is obviously not to become latter-day communications Luddites. Once we understand the implications, and guard against abuses, the new communications technology can be used as creative and liberating forces rather than oppressive ones.

One of the major challenges to development is to ensure not only that the right kinds of communication facilities are put in place, but that they deliver to the right addresses. Too many developmental projects peter out in national capitals and urban centers, leading to a further widening of the gap between cities and more isolated areas and, ultimately, between the rich and the poor. Canada is facing this particular challenge by adapting different means of communications to different parts of the country. Pilot projects involving

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direct broadcasting by satellite, using higher satellite frequencies and small portable earth terminals, are now being conducted in the remote parts of several provinces and Territories. In Saskatchewan, a predominantly rural province, an ambitious effort has been launched to develop a province-wide microwave, coaxial cable and optical fibre delivery system.

We Canadians are certainly not going to miss the opportunity to show off a few of our Canadian successes to a captive audience of distinguished communications experts. But I do not want to leave you with the impression that we think we have all the answers, or that our national experience should serve as a world model. Every country must determine for itself the most appropriate national communications policies. What is clear, however, is that no country can afford to develop policies which do not reflect the implications of technological developments which transcend national boundaries.

The most delicate question - one to which I alluded earlier - is the degree of influence or control governments should assume over the information which flows through communications facilities. In a democracy, how can the legitimate role of government, which is to protect and advance the public interest, be exercised without damaging one of the most basic of individual freedoms - the "right to communicate"? We are indebted to the pioneering work of the IIC and its President, Jean d'Arcy, for illuminating the subtleties and dangers inherent in this fundamental issue.

The dilemma is that if governments do not play at least a limited role in overseeing, to use a loaded word, the development process, technology will fill the vacuum without reference to the real requirements of its users. But by what criteria can we judge whether governments are wielding this considerable power responsibly? If I may echo the sentiments of Harvard Professor Daniel Bell, your Louis Cowan lecturer at last year's Annual Conference in London: The great variety and volume of problems now handled by the nation state indicate that it

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has become "too big for the small problems of life and too small for the big problems".

Canadians, who have zealously sought to retain their cultural distinctiveness and regional autonomy, have learned to agree to differ and to respect different cultural expressions among the peoples of the earth. Our nation, founded on the fundamental concept of sharing, is a fertile land where world cooperation and dialogue can take root. I would hope that the Canadian perspective will be useful to the international community. In an era when change is the only constant, I know that the international community can count upon the IIC and its members to continue to recognize potential problems and point the way toward new opportunities.